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Gender injustice and conflict: the importance of including women at every stage of a peace process

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Including women at every stage of a peace process is vital to avoid replicating the structural injustices that are often at the root of conflict during the process of building peace itself, argue Monica McWilliams and Avila Kilmurray.

Irish revolutionary James Connolly once referred to working class women as 'the slaves of slaves'. Is the parallel in circumstances of violent conflict that women are all too readily cast as 'the victims of victims'?

Perhaps so. Women are more likely to experience sexual abuse during violent conflicts, usually in situations where they are seen as the communal 'possessions' of their 'natural' male protectors. But they are also 'victims of victims' during subsequent peace processes. [Figures collated by UN Women](#) reported that in 31 major peace processes over the period 1992-2011, women were noticeable by their absence. The facts speak for themselves – a meagre 4% of signatories to the peace agreements were women; 2.4% of the mediators involved in peace settlements were women; 9% of negotiators of peace agreements were women; and only 16% of the 585 peace agreements concluded since 1990 made one or more references to women and gender.

Here in Northern Ireland, for example, the reference to women in 1998's Belfast/Good Friday Agreement got in by the proverbial skin of its teeth. We were told that gender was not a subject of interest in the Peace Agreement's leading 'chapeau' – the overarching initial paragraph from which all else flowed in drafting terms. Hence it followed that women could not be included as an explicitly named category. The fleeting reference to the enhancement of the representation of women in public life was only conceded when the Northern Ireland Women's Coalition successfully argued that women had been living in an 'armed patriarchy', and consequently any reference to political violence in the 'chapeau' automatically applied to the experience of women.

Whilst this history of exclusions is of course a moral injustice, denying and failing to address the very particular experiences of women during conflict is also counter-intuitive to peace.

In Northern Ireland, two significant initiatives that have tried to redress this trend include a community-based consultation on '[Women and Peacebuilding](#)'; and work to develop '[Gender Principles for Dealing with the Past](#)'. Guided by [UNSCR 1325](#), the first project encouraged women to discuss their concerns and hopes about relief, rehabilitation, justice, violence prevention, political representation, and dealing with the past. The issues they raised included many that fell into the broader sphere of social justice as well as concerns around increasing domestic violence – issues that Catherine O'Rourke highlights in '[Gender Politics in Transitional Justice](#)' as populating the 'private sphere'. It was also clear that peacebuilding does not stop with a peace agreement, but has to be worked at over time and react to the changing dynamics of conflict and injustice that women experience.

The second initiative to develop Gender Principles concluded in 2015, having thoroughly consulted victims and survivors on exactly what they needed in order to deal with the past. The project concluded that people's experiences of injustice and conflict and their resulting needs and coping

strategies were decidedly gendered and personal in nature, but responses were not. For example, whilst the vast majority of those killed in the Troubles were male, the majority of those bereaved were women: women who were then left to deal with both the sense of loss and the day-to-day realities of managing as single-headed households. Ongoing fear of re-victimisation was a theme that emerged – including, tellingly, re-victimisation resulting from the officially suggested processes and procedures for dealing with the past. The Gender Principles that were developed outlined ten priority areas:

1. Gender integration: fully integrate gender into the processes for dealing with the past.
2. Process-orientation: understand gender and dealing with the past as a process, not an event.
3. Empowerment, participation, ownership and control: prioritise victim ownership and control of process.
4. Inclusivity: be inclusive and accommodate diversity.
5. Addressing structural obstacles: recognise and redress structural obstacles to inclusion such as poverty and women's traditional roles in the home.
6. Holistic approach: respond to the whole victim and survivor.
7. Giving voice and being heard: honour individual stories.
8. Macro analysis: be attentive to the bigger picture such as the patterns that emerge from victims' stories.
9. Equality and diversity: value gender expertise and lived experience.
10. Local and global learning: craft bottom-up local responses that draw on international good practice.

Running to catch up

Despite these gains, negotiations with political parties to turn these principles into policy are ongoing. In Northern Ireland and elsewhere, much more must be done to harness the whole of society behind peace agreements. Failure to focus on the implementation of the meagre couple of lines won in the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement in Northern Ireland meant that there was little party political or governmental effort to turn the aspiration for the greater representation of women into practical measures. As the peace process stuttered and staggered from crisis to crisis, attention focused on the reform of policing, the decommissioning of paramilitary weapons, the demobilisation of armed groups and the share out of political power. These issues often stand centre stage in the 'public sphere' whilst, to quote O'Rourke again, 'women's issues' slip into the 'private sphere' and effectively disappear from policy-making. Over recent years, women in Northern Ireland have found that they have to run to catch up with the political process – to the detriment of both peace and justice.

This must be challenged. The appointment of Mrs. Arlene Foster as Northern Ireland's First Minister is a positive one but will have to be complemented by more systemic commitments to gender inclusion to make a real difference. Global lessons for *why* we ought to do so are in the public domain. The impressive Accord Insight publication [‘Women Building Peace’](#) draws learning from nine peace processes to argue that there is a need to mainstream a gender analysis of peacebuilding and conflict, noting that including women tends to put a greater emphasis on consensus building and inclusion, as well as on issues of social justice beyond those identified as core to violent conflict.

The report also offers lessons for *how* to better include women. For example, in Colombia the peace talks between the Government and FARC-EP were subjected to lobbying on behalf of gender equality groups. This direct action resulted in the 2013 National Summit of Women and Peace in Bogota, which later became the Gender Sub-Committee to the Peace Talks in September 2014. By May 2015, UN Women welcomed the inclusive nature of the process, which had included the appointment of Gender Experts. The lesson from Colombia and Northern Ireland is that if women

are to genuinely catch up, then the application of a gender lens requires significant, firm, and ongoing advocacy efforts.

Otherwise political conflicts in general tend to regard gender injustices as a side show to the processes of peacekeeping and peace-making, rather than a central component of it, missing the potential it carries to transform relationships, behaviours and perceptions at the heart of so much politically motivated violence.

The respective layers of conflict seem to privilege combatant groups (state and paramilitary) at the apex of a pyramid of concerns; with related cultural/religious/identity issues forming the next layer; followed by socio-economic interests (although depending on the nature of the conflict the question of land and resource ownership can rise up the scale); then related community issues; and finally, the concerns of less powerful groups within society, which alongside women can include indigenous peoples and minority ethnic groups for example. Clearly, the particular dynamics of any conflict will dictate the layering of issues of importance and priority, but what is less likely to change is the nature of the individuals that dictate the issues that reach the negotiating table: male political leaders, male combatants, and predominantly male negotiators still largely populate a heteropatriarchal peace-making elite.

Pancakes not pyramids

So what can we do? A concerted focus on gender injustice unlocks the peacebuilding potential of two of the Gender Principles listed above: that of honouring individual stories by giving women voice (vii) and the need to be attentive to the bigger picture which identifies the need for structural and systemic change (v). Two recent cases underline how these micro and macro priorities are linked. The first is the horrific lynching of 27-year-old Farkhunda Malikzada in Kabul, Afghanistan, [on the false accusation that she had burnt a copy of the Koran](#). It begs the question: how high is tackling structural gender inequality on the international peace agenda in conflict affected countries such as Afghanistan? The second example concerns refugees from the Syrian conflict. As increasing numbers of children are reared by lone mothers, will they be unfairly considered stateless given that the Syrian system requires registration of births by *fathers*? These are long-term issues not being discussed.

Women from conflict-affected areas still need to be supported to engage at the crucial level of peace-making and peacekeeping as well as peacebuilding (which tends to be more generalist in nature). In order to ensure that women's voices are heard, women's organisations need to be resourced to gather and share evidence, in particular experiences where women are making breakthroughs in terms of influencing the design and implementation of peace settlements. There are successes to be shared and adapted, and there clearly needs to be an inclusive global pool of expertise maintained. Organisations like [WILPF](#) have been developing negotiating skills across different conflict sites, building on exchanges between women activists who have direct experience of working in this area. Other NGOs have also provided examples of commendable programmes of women's empowerment in conflict situations. The pity, however, is that they are still resourced on a project by project basis. Gender injustice requires a far more consistent approach if it is to be outed and treated as a priority.

Some notable work pushing for this includes that led by Thania Paffenholz at the Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies in Geneva. Her team of more than 30 researchers working on "[Broadening Participation in Political Negotiations and Implementation](#)" (2011-15) concluded that women's inclusion takes place through seven different modalities: direct representation at the negotiation table; observer status for selected groups; consultations; inclusive commissions; high-level problem-solving workshops; public decision-making; and mass action. Elsewhere, UNDP has published [guidelines on mediation and negotiation processes](#) that include a strong gender component and these are currently being applied. The outcome of recent Syrian talks in Geneva will be a useful indicator of how successful the UN has been in adhering to these guidelines as well as applying the principles of UNSCR 1325 on the inclusion of women at the peace table. And in Northern Ireland there is some new potential, thanks to the reference to women's participation in the 2015 '[Fresh Start](#)' document.

Finally, given that the influence of regional and international actors on peace processes is crucial, their lead in this endeavour will be equally important. Inclusive processes challenge established power structures and resistance by powerful elites is to be expected. The international community has to be prepared to stand up to this resistance and lead by example. Women activists know that their own local 'elites' are most often the major obstacle to women's inclusion and that this has to be challenged. The time is long overdue to connect 'the global to the local', as is the usual refrain. Including women and promoting a gendered approach at all stages of a peace process will produce the type of resolutions and interventions that work for everyone and carry a far higher chance of success. It is vital to avoid replicating during the process of building peace the structural injustices often at the root of conflict in the first place, and doing that means more seats and more *diverse* seats at the table.



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Avila Kilmurray is currently a consultant on peacebuilding and migrant/refugee issues with the [Social Change Initiative](#) based in Belfast. Avila was Director of the Community Foundation for Northern Ireland (1994-2014), during which period she supported social activism, peacebuilding and women's issues across Northern Ireland, including work on the re-integration of political ex-prisoners and victims/survivors of violence. Over the period 2014-2016, Avila was employed as Director - Policy and Strategy with the Global Fund for Community Foundations. Avila has a long involvement with the Women's Movement, Trade Union Movement and community action in Northern Ireland. She is a native of Dublin and is currently Hon. Professor with the Transitional Justice Institute, University of Ulster and a Board member of Conciliation Resources.